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Intelligent life and self-destruction [letter]

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Body

Where are they?

Italian-American physicist Enrico Fermi was reported to have asked this question as he pondered the lack of evidence for extraterrestrial civilizations, despite the immensity of the universe. That was 70 years ago, before science had conclusively learned that there were other planets besides our own.

Presently, we believe that there are trillions of planets, some of which seem likely to be in the “Goldilocks zone,” where life, as we know it, can exist.

“Modern” humans have been around on this 5-billion-year-old “rock” for only about 300,000 years. It seems likely that some form of intelligent life evolved on other planets long before it occurred here. With so much more time to accomplish it, surely those civilizations would have achieved rapid space travel and communications across vast galactic distances.

But, as Fermi asked, “Where are they?”

Fermi should have had an insight into the answer to his own question. As one of the creators of the first atomic bomb, Fermi knew its potential to end human civilization — and likely all humanity.

Would it not then be possible that extraterrestrial civilizations had succumbed to a nuclear fate?

Now, 77 years since the creation of the atomic bomb, humans have found another way to end civilization. Climate change, pollution and resource depletion now seem more likely than nuclear winter to end our brief ***reign on Earth***.

It seems that the answer to Fermi’s question is that other intelligent life forms likely created the means of their own destruction. Otherwise we would know of their existence.

If that is truly the case, how can we avoid a similar fate?

William R. Davidson Jr., M.D.

Jonestown

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